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SAPPHO

BY WILLIAM K. PRENTICE

There are two reasons for our difficulty in understanding Sappho. The first is that we have very little of her poetry by which we can judge. The second is the more important: our judgment is perverted by false traditions about this poetess. Many of these traditions we know to be at least unreliable; yet we preserve them with the utmost scrupulousness because they are ancient, and it is very difficult to rid ourselves of the prejudices which they create.

It was apparently common knowledge in antiquity that she lived in the island of Lesbos some six hundred years before Christ. The only biographical information about her in any extant writing earlier than 400 B.C. is in Herodotus ii. 135. He tells us that Sappho had a brother Charaxus, a merchant, who once sailed to Egypt on business and there fell in love with a girl who appears to have been either a slave or a courtesan, on whom he squandered much money. The same story is given by later writers on the authority of Sappho's own words. It is not probable that the poetess herself or any of her contemporaries left any written record of her life. Certainly we know of none. If so, then nothing was known about Sappho or her family in Herodotus' time or later, excepting what was derived from her own poems or through oral tradition. How much is known about any poet through oral tradition, two centuries or more after the poet's death?

From Sappho's poems, however, some facts have been collected, and that not alone from those poems which are still preserved, but also from those now lost which ancient writers still possessed. Athenaeus, for example, in the third century of our era, said that he knew all of Sappho's songs by heart. He tells us the story of her brother Charaxus, citing these songs as the source of his information. He also says (x. 425): "The beautiful Sappho in several places celebrates her brother Larechus as cup-bearer to the Mytileneans in the town hall"; and a scholion to *Iliad* xx. 234, contains the statement: "It was the custom, as Sappho also says, for well-born youths

of good appearance to pour the wine." From these statements, attested in this way, it seems clear that Sappho's family had a good social standing in Mytilene, the chief city of Lesbos, and it is probable that the family was wealthy.

On the other hand a great deal has been made out of these poems which the poems, as far as we can judge, did not contain; and much more has been added to this which has no other source than the imagination of its authors. This process is due to two impulses with which we are thoroughly familiar. One of these proceeds from a perfectly sincere and laudable desire to say as much as possible about interesting persons. Under the influence of this desire many, and especially ancient, writers have accepted literally statements meant figuratively, have treated as fact what the poets meant for fiction, have made generalizations from particular instances, and have applied to the poets themselves words intended for the characters in the poems. For example, there is a well-known fragment (No. 85 in Bergk) which is translated by Merivale as follows:

I have a child, a lovely one,
In beauty like the golden sun,
Or like sweet flowers of earliest bloom;
And Claïs is her name, for whom
I Lydia's treasures, were they mine,
Would glad resign.

As far as we know this is the only source for the statements that Sappho had a daughter named Cleïs, that she was married, and, since Greek parents frequently named their children after their own parents, that her mother was named Cleïs. Suidas gives the husband's name, Cercolas, and says that the fellow came from Andros, supposed by some to mean "Mansland"; but no one knows whence Suidas got this information, and certainly Cercolas does not seem to be a very good name for anybody, least of all for a husband. What the fragment in question really says is this: "There is a pretty girl named Cleïs, whom I love, as fair of form as golden flowers: for her I'd not (exchange) all Lydia or (Lesbos?)." No word implies that Cleïs was the speaker's daughter, or that this speaker was Sappho. Such words have been spoken even by men, about young women who were not related to them by birth at all. The fragment was preserved by

Hephaestion, who quoted it for its meter only. Of course, Suïdas may have had some other authority for his statement about Sappho's marriage and her daughter. He may, for example, have had the complete poem, and this may have shown that Sappho was speaking in *propria persona*. But evidence no better than this fragment contains has been the sole basis of a great many similar statements by ancient writers. We are not justified in assuming that there was any other evidence in this case, and this is really no evidence at all.

When a woman has written about love as beautifully and passionately as Sappho did, it is natural enough to believe that she had much experience thereof. As a matter of fact nothing whatever is known of any love affair of hers, in the ordinary sense of that term. A great deal, however, has been written about her love for a certain Phaon, and of how she followed him to distant Sicily or cast herself from the cliff in Leucas, on the western coast of Greece, in her despair at his desertion. The fifteenth Heroïd is based upon this legend. It seems to me quite certain that Phaon was a fictitious if not a mythological character, and that Sappho's leap from the Leucadian Rock is pure fiction. That some metaphor in Sappho's poems gave rise to the story is possible, but wholly without reliable evidence. Neither Phaon nor Leucas is mentioned in any extant verse of hers. The *Parian Chronicle*, composed in the third century before Christ, mentions as a fact that Sappho fled to Sicily. This is also possible but improbable. Other Greek poets and writers went to Sicily, one perhaps as early as her time; but that is all we know; there is no word of hers, or of anyone even approximately contemporaneous, which suggests that she was ever there, and the *Parian Chronicle* is not a very reliable source of information about such matters.

Some of the ancients have said that Sappho loved or was loved by other poets, Archilochus of Paros, Alcaeus of Lesbos, Hipponax of Ephesus, and Anacreon of Teos. This is in accord with the general practice of ancient writers to bring into some sort of connection with every distinguished person others of similar distinction, either as friends or in the relation of teacher and pupil, whether there was any evidence for such an association or not. So many of these associations have been disproved on chronological or other grounds that

scholars have learned to be wary of statements of this sort. In the present instance, of the four lovers only Alcaeus was even a contemporary of the poetess. He, however, was not only a contemporary but a fellow-countryman of hers. There are, furthermore, those verses which are often combined and cited to prove that Alcaeus really was a lover of Sappho:

Violet-weaving, pure, sweet-smiling Sappho.

I would say somewhat, but shame prevents me.

If thou hadst a desire for things good and fair,
And if thy tongue were not stirring up something wrong,
Shame would not stay thee and cloud thine eyes,
But thou wouldst speak of this thing, properly.

The first verse is quoted from Alcaeus by Hephaestion, but has no necessary connection with the others. Aristotle (*Rhet.* i. 9) quotes the second verse, assigning it to Alcaeus, and says that the last four verses were by Sappho in reply. But the second as well as the last four verses are now assigned to Sappho by some modern scholars (Blass, *Rhein. Mus.*, XXIX [1874], 150), and seems to have been read as Sappho's by Anna Commena about 1110 A.D. The words accredited to Alcaeus by Aristotle, "I would say somewhat, but shame prevents me," may have been written originally by Alcaeus and quoted in her poem by Sappho, or they may be, as Blass believed, part of a dialogue between an unknown lover and his beloved. But in any case is there necessarily any word of love here at all? Was there nothing else of which Alcaeus may have wished to speak? We know nothing about Sappho's love affairs with men.

But what about her girl friends? That she had many such, and knew them intimately, even loved them passionately, was clear from her own verses before; our knowledge of her relationship to them has been much increased by the new-found poems and fragments. It was inevitable, in view of the well-recognized tendencies of ancient writers, that some of these girl friends should be represented as pupils of the poetess, and the belief that Sappho conducted a sort of school of music and poetry for young women is almost universal. Professor von Wilamowitz in his recent discussion of this subject (e.g., *Sappho und Simonides*, 1913) makes her the directress of a sort

of young ladies' seminary. The only direct evidence for this view is a single verse, Frag. 71: "I taught Hero of Gyara, the fleet runner." Even granting that the text, which is most uncertain, should be read as I have translated it—if not, it affords no evidence at all—and that Sappho is referring to herself in this line, does this prove that Hero went to Sappho's school? But what shall be said when Frag. 41 is cited as proof that there were rival seminaries in Lesbos? "Atthis, the thought of me is hateful to thee; thou flittest to Andromeda." Does that really mean that Atthis left Miss Sappho's to be a pupil at Miss Andromeda's?

I have spoken of two tendencies under which the prevailing opinions of Sappho have been developed. The second of these is the tendency to scandalous gossip. A woman in the Greek world who wrote so passionately of love, who said: "I love luxury and for me love has the brightness of the sun and its beauty" (Frag. 79), who seemed to have enjoyed a freedom and unconventionality of life and speech unknown among women of a later age, was a good subject for a popular comedy in the fourth century before Christ. Six dramatists of this time wrote plays called *Sappho*, one of them, Antiphanes, wrote also a *Phaon* and a *Leucadius*; Plato, the comic poet, wrote a *Phaon* too, and Menander a *Leucadia*. As far as we can judge—a few quotations have been preserved—these plays were coarse and scurrilous enough and full of absurd stories. The theme of all of them was doubtless Sappho and her loves. Not necessarily the real Sappho, however. What could these playwrights have known about her life? What did they care? They had no interest in facts. What they wanted was a sensational and effective plot; the real Sappho was dead and buried more than two centuries before their time. But from the fourth century on there appeared in literature a new Sappho, a beautiful, passionate woman, leading a life of freedom, luxury, and promiscuous sensuality. This is that Sappho who figures in the fifteenth *Heroid*, in Swinbourne's *Anactoria*, and in many other plays, poems, stories, or pictures in modern times. Some ancient writers, recognizing how different this Sappho was from the authoress of the poems, asserted that there were two Sapphos, one the poetess of Mytilene and the other a courtesan of Eressos; but there is no historical basis for their assertion. In 1681 Madame

Dacier expressed the opinion that Sappho has been grossly slandered. A hundred years ago Welcker proved it in an essay entitled "Sappho von einem herrschenden Vorurteil befreit" (*Kl. Schriften*, II, 80-144), and showed that the vulgar Sappho was the creation of the new comedy. This was a bold undertaking in 1816, for historical criticism was then in its infancy, and many rejected Welcker's arguments without refuting them. Recently Professor von Wilamowitz (*Sappho und Simonides*) has swept away again all this fabric of gossip and scandal. It was not difficult for him and ought not to have been necessary at all. For scholars have learned now how valueless much of the ancient tradition is—these statements based on false assumptions, shrewd but unwarranted combinations, misunderstandings, and pure fancy, collected with infinite care and patience and preserved as something sacred because made long ago and recorded in some sort of Greek or Latin. Yet the old traditions still survive. In the paucity of reliable information the modern, like the ancient and the mediaeval scholars, fear to omit from their accounts any statement, whatever its date or source, because they do not wish anything belonging to antiquity to be lost. They aim at completeness in their research, and to overlook anything is the greatest fault of all. They forget that the elimination of the false is as necessary to scholarly accuracy as the collection of the true. So they shrink from making final decisions and try to persuade themselves that there may be some value after all in these unproved assertions, that at least they represent what the ancients thought, or that industry in collecting material for argument will compensate for lack of judgment in using it. They do not realize that the false beclouds the true, and that the effort to reconcile conflicting traditions with one another or with facts leads to the perversion, not the increase, of knowledge.

This is a great evil and has far-reaching consequences. We preserve too much of antiquity. Much of the ancient literature is worse than useless and ought long since to have been consigned to oblivion. It is a barrier to progress and to a true understanding of the ancient world.

One of the natural results of the attitude of some classical scholars toward tradition may be seen in the recent articles by Mr. Edmonds

in the *Classical Review* (XXIII, 99-104, 156-58; XXVIII, 73-75, XXX, 97-104). With great ingenuity and much proficiency in writing Greek verse Mr. Edmonds has created out of hopelessly mutilated fragments of Sappho, contained in newly discovered papyri, poems which he believes represent in the main what Sappho wrote. In them he has incorporated much of the old tradition about Cleïs and the rest. Other scholars—Grenfell and Hunt, Schubart, Blass, Diehl, and Wilamowitz, for example—have wisely refrained from attempting to restore the missing lines, where sometimes only a few letters remain. But newspaper articles have given currency to these “reconstructed” poems of Sappho, in Greek and in English, and one of the newest books on Sappho, by Mary Mills Pattrick (1912), accepts them as if they were the genuine words of the poetess, confirming the old traditions.

Suppose now that, with respect to Sappho, we confine our attention to what is reasonably well attested. What we really know about her life is this: She lived in Lesbos about six hundred years before Christ. She belonged to a family which was apparently wealthy and respected. She was universally regarded as the greatest erotic poet of antiquity. She was an intimate friend of a number of girls or women, of whom some at least appear to have been wealthy like herself. Some of these women came from other cities than those in Lesbos, but it seems to have been in Lesbos that she knew them. The most natural explanation of their presence there and of her acquaintance with them seems to me that they all were serving for a time, probably while they were maidens, as resident attendants in some temple. But of this there is no evidence. They may have been simply friends. Their friendship was evidently very intimate. Sappho wrote about these women with a passionate affection, which to most seems comparable only to that between persons of opposite sex, and it is quite natural that many have interpreted the relationship between these women in the light of certain well-known practices of Greek men in their relations to one another.

Practices of various sorts are often matters of custom rather than of morals, and certainly, unless questions of absolute right and wrong are involved, we should not apply to a woman who lived twenty-five centuries ago all the standards of our own time. We

know almost nothing about the customs of her people or about her life. We can judge her only by what she has said herself. And judge her we must. In order to understand and appreciate some of her poetry at all we must decide whether she was what we would call a sexual degenerate, as some have thought, or at least whether her poems reflect a somewhat gross sensuality. We must examine these verses of hers, collecting all that reflect her character, ideas, and feelings, and in the light of the knowledge thus gained seek to interpret her poetry justly and sympathetically. But we must put out of mind all the stories told about the poetess on the ground that, as far as we can judge at all, they have no foundation in fact and had their origin at least two centuries after Sappho's death.

Athenaeus, of the third century after Christ, has given us a significant quotation from Sappho, with his own opinion upon it: "Sappho," he says, "being a thorough woman and a poetess besides, was ashamed to separate honour from elegance, and speaks thus: 'But I love elegance, and for me love has the splendor and the beauty of the sun' [Frag. 79], making it evident to everybody that the desire of life that she confessed had brilliancy and honor in it; and these things especially belong to virtue." The translation of Athenaeus' criticism I have borrowed from Mr. Wharton; the word "elegance" is his. It must be remembered also that Sappho's phrase τὸ κάλον, which I have translated "beauty," also means "honor" or "nobility." Personally, however, I am not inclined to lay as much stress upon the moral quality of this quotation as Athenaeus did, even when taken in connection with the following: "Wealth without goodness is no safe neighbor" (Frag. 80); the latter sentiment seems to me a platitude rather prettily expressed. On the other hand I can see no indication of moral obliquity in the first passage any more than in that couplet in which she says: "What country girl bewitches thy heart, who knows not how to draw her skirts about her ankles" (Frag. 70), whether these words were written in jest about Andromeda, as Athenaeus says, or not. Galen the physician, in the second century after Christ, has given us something more to the point. "It is better therefore," he says, "knowing that the beauty of youth is like spring flowers and gives short-lived delight, to approve both the Lesbian when she says: 'For one is fair to look upon; but he that is good

will straightway be also fair' (Frag. 101), and also Solon, when he expresses the same opinion." It is not possible to render Sappho's couplet adequately in English, because the word *κάλος*, which I have translated "fair," means of course "noble" also. The passage has been spoiled by some of the editors (e.g., Bergk) who have added the word *ἀγαθος* at the end of the first verse; this emendation makes the couplet read: "He who is fair to look upon is good, and he who is good will soon be fair also" (Wharton). I do not believe that Solon expressed any such sentiment as that conveyed by Bergk's reading. If Solon's opinion was the same as Sappho's in this matter, I think we may believe her meaning to be that beauty in the ordinary sense is only skin-deep, as we say, and that moral excellence is a nobler quality; and this is all her words do express as they stand.

Certainly there is a moral tone about the verses preserved by Aristotle and quoted above: "If thou hadst a desire for things good and fair, and if thy tongue were not stirring up something wrong, *αἶδώς* would not stay thee and cloud thine eyes, but thou wouldst speak of this thing, properly" (Frag. 28). The moral quality of these words is not affected whether we believe they were Sappho's reply to Alcaeus, as Aristotle thought, or that they were spoken by some unknown maiden to her lover.

Three ancient writers, Herodotus, Strabo, and Athenaeus, testify that Sappho wrote several odes vehemently criticizing her brother's affair in Egypt with the young lady of unsavory reputation. One of these witnesses states explicitly that he was personally familiar with the poems in question. This is real evidence. It does not tend to show that the poetess was herself dissolute, but quite the contrary. Among the new-found papyri there is one which seems to relate to this same brother and if it does it throws a great deal of light upon Sappho's character. It may not be complete, and even what is preserved is somewhat mutilated. But the mutilations do not destroy the sense and the restorations are fairly certain. It is as follows:

Ye holy Nereïds, give back to me unharmed my brother; may he hither come, and whatsoever his heart desires, fulfil it all. What faults were his before, undo them all, that to his friends there may be joy, and grief unto his enemies; nay, may we have no enemies forevermore. And may he wish to make his sister share his honor, and forget the grievous sorrow wherewith

a while ago his heart was crushed, when he learned of the reproach which cut him to the quick at festal gatherings—died down anon, a little while, but soon flared up afresh. Nay hear, O Goddess, if I used to cheer thy heart with songs, and do thou sink all sorrows in black night, averting evil from our midst.—[Grenfell and Hunt, *Oxyrh. Pap.*, I, 7].

It seems to me that a woman who wrote thus, however long ago, was not far from our own standards. We come on more uncertain ground, perhaps, when we reach those poems in which she speaks of her girl friends. Before passing on, however, I wish to call attention to the invocation in the last stanza. The "goddess" here can hardly be any other than Aphrodite; and certainly the poetess was not thinking of Aphrodite at this moment as the goddess of sensual passion, but as the one to whom she could appeal to restore the old affection which once existed between herself and a brother.

The only ode of Sappho preserved to us apparently complete is the "Ode to Aphrodite." The crux of this poem is in the sixth stanza: "For even if she flies, she shall soon follow, and if she rejects gifts, shall yet give, and if she loves not, shall soon love, however loth" (Wharton's translation). Only in the last words, *κῶν ἐθέλοισα*, is there an indication of the sex of the person referred to, and for this phrase the reading is uncertain. Only one of our manuscripts of Dionysius gives the verse as Wharton translates it; none of the others can be read at all without emendation. The addition of a single letter to the present text would make this verse refer to the object of the sentence instead of the subject, and permit us to read: "If *he* love thee not *he* soon shall love thee, though thou fain wouldst not," i.e., even if thou shouldst cease to love him. Perhaps there are few of us who at first sight would not prefer this reading, because the poem as a whole seems to refer to a natural love of Sappho for some lover, and passionate love for one of the same sex seems to most persons unnatural and degenerate. But there are two objections to this emendation. One is a formal one: it is hardly conceivable that this stanza was so constructed that no word indicated even the gender of the subject, so that in supplying the necessary pronouns it is impossible to determine whether "he" or "she" should be used. The second objection is this: if the subject of this stanza was a man, and if on other similar occasions the goddess had heard Sappho's prayer

and granted her request, then this Sappho had various lovers and had satisfaction of their love. This presents the poetess to us as a wanton; if she openly avows such an experience, her standards must have been different from ours indeed.

Most of the editors of the Greek text now read this stanza as Wharton does, but most of the English translators have deliberately misread it in one way or another. Personally I have no longer any doubt that this poem deals with Sappho's own relations with certain of her girl friends. Are we then to believe that a harmless affection of one woman for others expressed itself in such language? In deciding this question it should be remembered that the "Ode to the Nereïds" quoted above shows clearly that for Sappho the goddess Aphrodite was far more than the source of sensual passion, and that, as Professor von Wilamowitz has observed, the words "draw unto thy love" may mean simply "draw unto thy affection." But to most it seems that the "Ode to Aphrodite" must be interpreted in the light of the "Ode to Anactoria":

I count him equal to the gods, that man who sits with thee face to face,
and close at hand doth hear thy sweet voice and delicious laughter; indeed,
indeed this makes *my* heart to flutter in my breast. For I, when I see thee
for a moment—I can no longer speak; nay, but my tongue is clogged; all
in an instant a subtile fire surges through my flesh, a mist is on my eyes, a
roaring in my ears; sweat poureth down me, and trembling seizes me in
every part; I'm paler than the summer grass; I seem to be all but dead.
Yet all must be endured. . . .

The speaker in this poem may not be Sappho; it is a mere assumption that these words are meant as hers. But the speaker is a woman, as the fourteenth line clearly shows, and so is the person addressed. It seems impossible not to recognize here a very sensual element. These verses are a startlingly accurate description of an experience familiar to most persons, and all we know, not only about abnormal sexual relations between men and men, but also about extreme and abnormal affections between women and women, especially among young women living in close association away from their natural homes, comes immediately to mind. And thus, from her own verses, we seem to have a confirmation of the old tradition about Sappho, even though the details of that tradition are wholly rejected.

It would help very much in understanding this poem if we could know on what sort of an occasion it was produced. It seems to me most probable that the occasion was a wedding, and that the first stanza looks forward to the time when bride and groom will be at last together and alone. This situation makes an especially strong appeal to the imagination of people among whom a couple sees little or nothing of each other in private before their marriage. Doubtless this was the custom in Lesbos, in Sappho's time; certainly it was so in other ancient Greek states. "When I see thee" means "when I see thee dressed for thy wedding," does it not? Is such an emotion as is here described impossible for a perfectly pure-minded girl when she sees under such circumstances her girl friend, whom she has loved as one girl may love another, and with whom hitherto she has shared, as far as two individuals can share, the most intimate experiences? I think not. Only such a person must have been capable of feeling so strongly that psychic emotions were able to produce in her strong physical disturbances.

These two poems no longer stand alone. There are others of similar character among the new-found papyri, and two of these are sufficiently complete to add considerably to our understanding of the affection between the poetess and her friends. One is a fragment among the Berlin Papyri, No. 9722, p. 2; in the following translation I have followed Wilamowitz's interpretation. Sappho is telling someone of her last conversation with one of these friends who was about to leave her:

But honestly I wish that I were dead. When she left me, she said, sobbing: "Ah, Sappho, what a dreadful thing this is; indeed, indeed, I do not want to leave you." And I replied: "Goodbye, and don't forget me. You know how we have cared for you. But if not, I want to remind you. Do you remember what an easy, happy life we led? Many a wreath of violets and roses you laid upon your locks and braided hair, when you were with me; many a woven chain of spring flowers you wore about your dainty neck; plenty of myrrh and perfume royal was for your toilet . . . soft cushions . . . to still your longing . . . no shrine there was . . . nor sacred grove . . .

And lastly, Berlin Pap., No. 9722, p. 5, which is practically undamaged, as far as it is preserved at all. In this also I have

followed Wilamowitz. Sappho is talking with Atthis about Arignota, who has gone back to Sardis:

. . . . from Sardis oft turning her thoughts hither.

While we lived together, Arignota adored you as a goddess, and took the most pleasure in your singing. But now she shines among the Lydian women as, when the sun is set, the rosy-beamed moon outshineth all the stars, and sheds her light upon the briny sea and on the flowery plow-lands equally. The dew falls gently and the roses bloom, the dainty grasses and the clover sweet. Ofttimes she wanders up and down, remembering the lovely Atthis, her tender spirit full of longing, her heart of loneliness. Loudly she calls us to come thither; but her cry reaches us not: the words we cannot catch, Night, with its many ears, hearing repeats across the sea.

We take such pride in concealing our feelings! We have so schooled ourselves to dominate by will and habit our natural emotions that many have lost the capacity for feeling strongly, to our great detriment. Sorrow still brings tears to some, anger, a flush, fear, paleness, and trembling. To many even these reactions are repugnant. Some actually praise indifference as something fine and noble and confound it with self-control. It was just so among the decadent Romans of the empire; it is one of the evil products of a high civilization. We repress our emotions till our spirits are atrophied. And yet the craving for excitement is not stilled. The normal experiences of life no longer satisfy us: we must find strange, new, violent diversions. We race around the world, court danger, take delight in speed for mere speed's sake, in automobiles or roller-coasters according to our means. Such stimuli soon lose their effect, and we increase the dose. We begin by counting twenty miles a fearsome rate, advance to forty or fifty, and find ourselves soon wanting aëroplanes. The thing's not new: the essence is in any garden swing. The deplorable fact is not that we want the cup of life filled full but that we are losing, just as others have lost, enjoyment in a normal human life.

The one passion which no amount of refinement can eradicate is that of sex. And that is why so few books or plays or even amusements which do not appeal more or less directly to this passion have power to give the thrill which we now demand, and without which all pleasures seem insipid. An untainted affection for a friend of the

same sex or for a brother, yet strong enough to produce physical reactions such as faintness, lies beyond the experience of most of us, as it lay beyond the experience of the decadent Greeks and Romans. That is why so many have assumed that some of Sappho's verses imply an impure and sensual relationship. But I count that a happy person who cares, and cares hard, in the common and normal experiences of life. For one who loves a friend as passionately, and who suffers at the loss of such a friend as intensely, as Sappho did, knows, by virtue of that same capacity to feel keenly, more of happiness and of the joy of living than many of us.

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